

Message Text

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C O N F I D E N T I A L BRUSSELS 5563

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: PINT, BE

SUBJECT: INTERNAL POLITICS - OUTLOOK AS PARLIAMENT RETURNS

1. SUMMARY: AS GOB GEARS UP FOR PARLIAMENT'S RETURN OCTOBER 8, TALK OF A POSSIBLE GOVERNMENT CRISIS OVER REGIONALIZATION THIS SESSION HAS NEARLY DISAPPEARED, SPECULATION CONCERNING AN IMMINENT CABINET RESHUFFLE ON THE SOCIALIST SIDE HAS RECEDED, AND THE FOCUS OF CONCERN HAS TURNED TO ECONOMIC PROBLEMS, SUCH AS INFLATION, TRADE UNION DEMANDS UPON THE GOVERNMENT, AND STRIKES AT LIEGE OVER MAINTENANCE OF THE WORKERS' PURCHASING POWER. IN THE CABINET, PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL RELATIONSHIPS ARE SHOWING STRAINS, WHICH, IF THEY CONTINUE, COULD HAVE SOME IMPACT ON US-BELGIAN RELATIONS. END SUMMARY.

2. RECENT TALKS WITH LEADERS OF THE PARTIES IN PRIME MINISTER LEBRUTON'S GOVERNMENT REVEAL THAT EVEN THOSE LEAST DISPOSED TO SUPPORT ITS CONTINUATION IN POWER (E.G. CVP PRESIDENT MARTENS) DOUBT THAT IT WILL BREAK UP MUCH BEFORE ELECTIONS ARE REQUIRED IN NOVEMBER 1975 OR THAT THIS PARLIAMENT WILL DEAL IN ANY FUNDAMENTAL WAY WITH THE KEY ISSUE OF REGIONALIZATION. THE REASON IS THAT IT IS BECOMING INCREASINGLY APPARENT THAT
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THE MOVEMENT TOWARD AUTONOMY FOR THE LINGUISTIC GROUPS IN

BELGIUM HAS ALREADY CREATED ALMOST INSOLUBLE PROBLEMS BECAUSE OF CONFUSING, OVERLAPPING, UNMANAGEABLE AND ECONOMICALLY BURDENSOME POLITICAL AND ADMINISTRATIVE JURISDICTIONS. FURTHER, PRECIPITOUS ACTION ON SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC REGIONALIZATION MIGHT ONLY MAKE THE SITUATION WORSE, AS VICE PRIME MINISTER TINDEMANS HAS WARNED, AND SOME STRUCTURAL RATIONALIZATION, A SLOW AND PAINFUL PROCESS AT BEST, NEEDS TO BE ACHIEVED ALONG WITH ANY FURTHER, SIGNIFICANT DECENTRALIZATION OF AUTHORITY. NEVERTHELESS, REGIONALIZATION AND THE LINGUISTIC PROBLEM THAT IS AT ITS ROOT REMAINS BELGIUM'S MOST VOLATILE ISSUE; AN UNEXPECTED SPARK COULD EASILY IGNITE IT. (BRUSSELS 5543 REPORTS ON RECENT INFLAMMATORY DECISION BY FLEMISH CULTURAL COUNCIL TO REQUIRE USE OF FLEMISH LANGUAGE IN ALL BUSINESS COMMUNICATIONS IN FLANDERS.)

3. CABINET PROBLEMS ARE OF TWO SORTS. THE FIRST STEMS FROM SCANDALS IN THE COMMUNICATIONS MINISTRY, WHICH CLAIMED THE SCALP OF SOCIALIST STATE SECRETARY FOR WALLONIAN PLANNING AND HOUSING DUBOIS LAST MAY AND HAS THREATENED SINCE TO CLAIM THAT OF THE COMMUNICATIONS MINISTER HIMSELF. MINISTER ANSEELE, "DOYEN" OF THE FLEMISH SOCIALISTS LEADERS, HAS YET TO BE IMPLICATED IN THE CHANNELING OF SEVERAL BILLION OF RTT FRANCS TO THE DUBOIS FAMILY BUSINESSES VIA APPARENTLY ILLEGAL PRIVATE TENDERS BUT HIS MINISTRY WAS CLEARLY RESPONSIBLE; BECAUSE OF THIS, AS WELL AS HIS AGE, HE WAS -- ACCORDING TO SOCIALIST ASSOCIATES -- ONCE PREPARED TO RESIGN, PROVIDED A GRACEFUL EXIT COULD BE ARRANGED AS PART OF A LARGER CABINET SHAKE-UP.

4. LEBURTON'S OTHER CABINET PROBLEM IS OF GREATER IMPORT FOR US. NEW MINISTERS FINDING THEIR WAY AROUND GOVERNMENT ARE GETTING IN EACH OTHER'S WAY, AS MIGHT BE EXPECTED IN A CABINET OF 36 PERSONS. THE WORST OF THIS INVOLVES A TENDENCY OF SOME SOCIALIST MINISTERS, AND NOTABLY THE PRIME MINISTER, TO ENGAGE IN DEALINGS WITH FOREIGN GOVERNMENTS WITHOUT THE TRADITIONAL APPROVAL OF OR EVEN CONSULTATION WITH THE FOREIGN MINISTER OR HIS MINISTRY. TYPICAL EXAMPLES WERE LEBURTON'S VISITS TO MALTA AND ZAIRE AND HIS DEALINGS WITH IRAN OVER THE IBRAMCO REFINERY PROJECT AT LIEGE, LABOR MINISTER GLINNE'S PUBLIC CALL FOR NON-RECOGNITION OF THE CHILEAN JUNTA, AND SECSTATE (ECON COOPERATION) PETRY'S INSISTENCE ON DIFFUSION OF CONFIDENTIAL

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BELGIAN AID AND APPLYING A MORAL YARDSTICK FOR JUDGING RECIPIENTS' ELIGIBILITY. PETRY'S DOGMATISM, WHICH CONFLICTS DIRECTLY WITH BELGIAN ECONOMIC INTERESTS IN ITS FORMER AFRICAN COLONIES LED TO PUBLIC SPECULATION, AND PRIVATE STATEMENTS BY LEBURTON, THAT SHE WOULD EITHER CONFORM TO GOVERNMENT POLICY OR HAVE TO LEAVE THE CABINET. IN GLINNE'S CASE, JOURNALISTS DID NOT HESITATE TO POINT OUT THE INCONSISTENCY OF HIS HARD LINE ON CHILE AND GOB POLICY VIS-A-VIS OTHER COUNTRIES, E.G.

ZAIRE AND CZECHOSLOVAKIA.

5. FOREIGN MINISTER VAN ELSLANDE IS, OF COURSE, ALSO NEW TO HIS JOB, AND ALTHOUGH LEARNING QUICKLY, HAS NOT YET BEEN ABLE TO PROVIDE THE FIRM LEADERSHIP HARMEL DID. UNLIKE HARMEL, HOWEVER, HE MUST CONTEND WITH A PRIME MINISTER WHO ALSO IS NEW TO HIS JOB AND WHO ALSO HAS NOT HESITATED TO ENCROACH UPON THE FOREIGN MINISTER'S TRADITIONAL DOMAIN.

6. TENTATIVE PLANS TO RESOLVE CABINET PROBLEMS THROUGH A RESHUFFLE OF SOCIALIST CABINET MEMBERS SEEMED ASSURED WHEN, WITH THE DEATH OF LIEGE MAYOR DESTENAY, INTERIOR MINISTER CLOSE WAS PREPARED TO MOVE TO THE MAYORALTY, THUS PAVING THE WAY FOR ANSEELE'S CONCURRENT RESIGNATION AND PROVIDING MULTIPLE OPPORTUNITIES FOR OTHER CABINET SHIFTS. THAT PLAN CAME UNSTUCK, HOWEVER, WHEN LIEGE SOCIALISTS CHOSE DEPUTY MAYOR CHARLES BAILLEY TO REPLACE DESTENAY. IN THE INTERIM, ANSEELE HAS MANAGED TO SOLIDIFY HIS HOLD ON HIS MINISTERIAL PORTFOLIO, AND CABINET REORGANIZATION IS THUS BACK TO SQUARE ONE.

7. THE LULL IN THE POLITICAL AND LINGUISTIC SQUABBLES HAS BEEN AMPLY FILLED BY THE PRESENTATION THIS MONTH OF NEARLY IDENTICAL DEMANDS BY BOTH THE SOCIALIST AND THE CHRISTIAN TRADE UNION CENTRALS FOR GOVERNMENT ACTION TO SAFEGUARD WORKERS' PURCHASING POWER AND EMPLOYMENT AND TO "DEMOCRATIZE" FACTORY LIFE. THE USUALLY MORE MILITANT LIEGE TRADE UNIONS, WHICH COUNT SEVERAL ACKNOWLEDGED COMMUNISTS AMONG THEIR LEADERS, TOOK MATTERS INTO THEIR OWN HANDS, HOWEVER, REJECTING COST OF LIVING ADJUSTMENTS ACCEPTED ELSEWHERE AND ENGAGING IN A FACTORY SEIZURE AND STRIKES AT SEVERAL LIEGE PLANTS. SOCIALIST TRADE UNION LEADERS HAVE BEEN LOATH TO TRY TO REESTABLISH DISCIPLINE BUT A FIRM STAND BY CHRISTIAN LEADERS FORCED THE SOCIALISTS INTO SOME ACTION. THE PRIME

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MINISTER AND THE LABOR MINISTER HAVE SINCE BEEN PERSONALLY ENGAGED IN EFFORTS TO DEFUSE THE SITUATION WHICH, ALONG WITH THE PROLONGED DOCKERS STRIKE OF LAST SPRING, SEEMS NEVERTHELESS TO BODE ILL FOR LABOR PEACE THIS WINTER. STRAUSS-HUPE

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